DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 983 CG 023 939

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TITLE Interactive Theater: Its Use with Adolescents.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 32p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Counseling Techniques; Counselor Role; Pregnancy; *School Counseling; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; Skits; Social Problems; Substance Abuse; *Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Interactive Theater

ABSTRACT

Interactive theater typically involves the presentation of a short skit tied to a socially relevant issue such as teenage pregnancy or the use of illegal substances. Interactive theater, with some cautions considered, holds much promise as an educational tool to be used by a school counselor. Cautions requiring consideration include: thorough education of cast members around skit topics; extensive time commitment of cast members and advisor; advisor must have skills to effectively facilitate a meaningful dialogue during the audience participation; and there must be available support for impacted audience members. Interactive theater has been shown to be both beneficial to the audience and cast members in these ways: (1) lines of communication on difficult social issues are opened in non-threatening ways; (2) valuable educational information is provided and the possibility of increased use of medical services is evidenced; (3) cast members are provided with a support group for dealing with personal issues; and (4) cast members have been shown to gain in self-esteem due to their participation in interactive theater groups. Interactive theater offers a viable means of providing education about difficult social issues for adolescents. Having a knowledge of interactive theater can be important for school counselors who struggle to effectively meet the challenge of educating students so that they are adequately prepared to meet the demands they face in society. (ABL)

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Interactive Theater:
Its Use With Adolescents

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Running head: INTERACTIVE THEATER

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Abstract

This review discusses the benefits to students of drama and theater participation, defines interactive theater, and discusses the benefits and cautions that must be considered before implementing an interactive theater program with adolescents. Literature regarding interactive theater programs across the country is reviewed. In addition, author interviews with five individuals who advise interactive theater programs in Maine are discussed.

A school counselor sits in her office reading over student evaluations from the previous year's drug and alcohol awareness program that was presented to freshmen. Knowing that adolescent use of illegal substances is on the rise throughout the country and in her school, she is discouraged by the negativeness of the student responses she is reading. Questions such as "How can we make this year's awareness program more meaningful?" and "How can we gain active student participation?" begin to run through her head.

School counselors struggle on a daily basis with this type of self-questioning, as they work to assist students in effectively addressing the social issues they confront. This paper discusses one method that has proven valuable to counselors who are faced with the dilemma of providing education on today's social issues in a meaningful manner to adolescents.

Interactive theater, a method involving audience participation following a theatrical presentation, has met with much success throughout the country since its inception in 1973 in New

York (Boria, Welch, & Vargas, 1981). Born out of the Family Life Division of New York Medical College, Family Life Theatre involves teenagers as the actors in performances to their peers. By creating and performing skits around current social issues, communication and credibility gaps are eliminated as teens become active participants in educating other adolescents (Boria, Welch, & Vargas, 1981).

"At a time when four out of ten teenage girls will become pregnant, one out of ten teens will contract an STD and over half of teens are sexually active--innovative methods of education must be used to reach teens. Teen theatre (interactive theater) does this by providing accurate information, modeling responsible decision making and giving parents and teens an avenue for open discussion on such topics as sexuality, choices, responsibilities, substance abuse and incest" (Burdyshaw & Fowler, 1986, p.8).

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature concerning the benefits of using drama and theater activities with students, to define

interactive theater, and to examine the benefits and cautions that must be considered before implementing an interactive theater program. Programs throughout the country--and more specifically in Maine--which use interactive theater are described. By learning about interactive theater, school counselors can assess the feasibility of using this educational approach with their students.

Review of Literature

Definition of Interactive Theater

While the label varies, extemporaneous psychodrama (J. Grant, personal communication, September 6, 1991), teen theater (Dryfoss, 1988), psychoeducational drama (Urtz and Kahn, 1982), and interactive theater (J. Smith, personal communication, August 27, 1991) are essentially similar approaches.

Interactive theater typically involves the presentation of a short skit tied to a socially relevant issue such as teen pregnancy or the use of illegal substances. Skits are generally

somewhat improvisational in nature. While the setting and characters are determined prior to presentation, actors so not adhere to a specific dialogue. Each performance is unique, allowing for spontaneity and realism (Boria, Welch, & Vargus, 1981). As a skit concludes, no closure is evident; rather, the skit ends with unresolved issues and heightened emotions. Following the skit, actors remaining in character, field questions, and become involved in a dialogue with the audience (J. Smith, personal communication, August 27, 1991).

Urta and Kahn (1982) see interactive theater as having its roots in psychodrama, as the characters are struggling with real life issues. Interactive theater combines the staged nature of theater with the immediacy of psychodrama to, in a very powerful manner, increase understanding of self and the human condition.

The essence of interactive theater is well stated by Boria, Welch and Vargas (1981) who write, "the problems are very frequently without solution because it is not the purpose of the

theatre to offer ready-made solutions but rather to help actors and audience alike...to see reality with new eyes" (p. 152).

Benefits of Drama and Theater Activities

Drama and theater activities have long been touted to have many beneficial effects on participants. Silverman (1983) states that theatrical productions benefit participants by enhancing their self confidence, helping them view themselves more positively because of their successes, and helping to improve student social skills as they learn to work as a team toward common goals. In a similar vein, Batchelor (1981), when reporting results of a research project done with 13-16 year old black youths from New York City, stated that "the students' experience in creative dramatics and theater arts increased their self esteem, facilitated their verbal and non-verbal communication, and significantly enhanced their ability to lead more socially constructive lives in school" (p.143). Spolin (1986) concurs with the idea that drama activities enhance a student's ability to develop

improved verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Additionally, Spolin (1986) believes theater activities help students to develop good problem solving and group interaction skills.

Self knowledge and knowledge of others also are seen as positive aspects of theater participation (McCaslin, 1984). Drama has the ability to provide a direct personal emotional experience for the participant (Way, 1967). "Dramatic activities help people come to grips with their own feelings, outlooks, dispositions, abilities and limitations - to get in closer touch with their real selves, to come to know themselves better" (Broswell, 1975, p.96). Colby(1987) views the real heart of drama as being its ability to have individuals put themselves in the place of another. Drama, in Colby's (1987) view, has the power to help an individual identify with other people's situations.

While each of the aforementioned benefits is important to consider when weighing the feasibility of an interactive theater program, likely the critical benefit is that participation

in theater activities can enhance both one's knowledge of self, as well as knowledge of others.

Interactive Theater Groups Across the Country

Interactive teen theater had its beginning in 1973 as an attempt by the Family Life Division of New York Medical College to provide health education programming for adolescents. Through this effort was born Family Life Theatre (Harrington, 1983). In its initial form, scripted skits were presented without audience interaction at the conclusion. Approximately two years into the process, an improvisational aspect was added, in that while skits held to a basic structure, the specifics varied with each performance. Additionally, actors stayed in character at the end of the performance and fielded questions from the audience (Borici, Welch, & Vargas, 1981).

Training of the multi-ethnic cast members who come from throughout New York City is two-fold. Teens are taught techniques of improvisational theater and are expected to attend health education seminars related to the issues around which skits will be developed. Topics have

included sexuality, drug use and abuse, loneliness, love, abusive parents, and unplanned pregnancies. Rigorous standards of quality for both performance and information validity are applied (Harrington, 1983). Youths typically stay with one of the companies between six months and two years.

While there are no definitive answers to the question of how well the program is working, several indicators of program success are in evidence. These include an increased demand for adolescent medical care and family planning services, requests from across the nation for assistance in beginning similar programs, and finally, positive audience feedback (Borici, Welch, & Vargas, 1981).

Begun in 1981, New Image Teen Theatre, under the sponsorship of Planned Parenthood of San Diego and Riverside Counties, has modeled itself after Family Life Theatre of New York (Burdyshaw & Fowler, 1986). Each May, ten cast members are selected to perform the following October through May for approximately 6,500 people, as part of a

fifty-show season. Typical topics for the skits include peer pressure, parent-teen communication, teen pregnancy, sex roles, date rape, substance abuse and teen suicide.

In order to reach a larger audience, The New Image Theatre in 1983 created a video adapted from their live show. Since this initial television involvement, the group has been nationally recognized for its work (Burdyshaw and Fowler, 1986).

Being a part of the New Image Teen Theatre has its benefits for cast members, including increased self-esteem, due, in part, to the admiration they receive from their peers and the acceptance they feel from the group, and a sense that they are helping others and providing an important contribution to society (Burdyshaw & Fowler, 1986).

The benefit to the sponsoring Planned Parenthood group also has been evident. There has been an increased use by teens of medical services, positive public relations have developed, and a working relationship between

community groups not present before has been established (Burdyshaw and Fowler, 1986).

Audience response to New Image Theatre performances has been overwhelmingly positive. Two-thirds of parents and half of teens completing evaluation forms felt more able to communicate about the issues presented following the performance. Pre and post testing showed an increase of between 28% and 100% in knowledge with regards to adolescent sexuality and birth control (Burdyshaw & Fowler, 1986).

In 1984, following the model of Family Life Theatre of New York, Planned Parenthood of Greater Dallas also began a similar group, Teen-Age Communication Theatre (TACT). The 11 cast members spent extensive amounts of time in rehearsal, as well as receiving forty hours of education around issues to be incorporated into the skits before their first performance. Response to their premiere year was favorable (Britton, 1986).

TACT performs a three-part production lasting approximately one and a quarter hours. In the first portion, a series of short skits dealing

with sexuality issues are presented. Recognizing the interrelatedness of adolescent issues, other topics, such as peer pressure and drug use, are incorporated. In the second portion, actors remain in character and receive comments and questions from the audience. This interaction gives the audience a chance to be involved immediately with the cast and the subject matter. Finally, in the third portion, cast members introduce themselves and discuss their participation in TACT (Britton, 1986).

Members of the TACT cast view the experience as providing an educational resource and an emotional support for themselves and their peers. Founders of TACT see the group providing a "teen peer educational vehicle that vividly conveys the connection between behavior and consequences, and that inspires people to communicate candidly about sensitive issues" (Britton, 1986, p.27).

In 1985, Teen Theater Troupe, of the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts and Planned Parenthood of Louisiana, began performing interactive theater skits in a show titled, "Ask A

Simple Question" on the topics of teen sexuality and teen pregnancy (Weiner, 1987). This program differs from those previously described in that all of the actors are students at a performing arts high school, thus having training in music, drama and dance. Teen Theater Troupe shows follow the format of skit presentation with audience questions and comments following each skit. Actors stay in character to help facilitate this discussion.

At the end of each session, audience written evaluation is requested. The Teen Theatre Troupe is interested in whether their performance presented information in an understandable manner and in whether they challenged the audience to think about values (Weiner, 1987). Through this evaluation process, the group came to realize that more follow-up was required after a performance. Students and faculty needed a means by which to continue discussions and seek additional help, if warranted. As a means of addressing the need for follow-up, the group developed a resource book which is now left with the participating school.

Additionally, students are given cards containing important resource or referral phone numbers for their use (Weiner, 1987).

Benefits of the program to audiences include more open communication noted between parents and students, and a heightened awareness of individual responsibility for decision making. Cast members view the trust and respect developed among cast members as being the major benefit for them (Weiner, 1987).

Dryfoos (1988), in a discussion of interactive theater groups organized by Planned Parenthood affiliates throughout the country, sees several positive aspects to this approach. First, audiences are deeply moved by performances and a high level of audience interchange is stimulated. Secondly, this approach has, in some instances, allowed previously taboo subjects to be discussed in the schools. The impact on cast members is tremendous, causing some to claim the experience to be a turning point in their lives. A caution Dryfoos (1988) raises is the large time commitment

necessary for participants in interactive theater performances.

Interactive Theater in Maine

In 1986, the University of Maine Cooperative Extension Service implemented a program called Reaching Out for Teen Awareness (ROTA) which provided both leader and performer training in interactive theater techniques (P. Vertefeuille, personal communication, August 26, 1991). Through this training, several schools in York County--where ROTA workshops have been available for three years--incorporated interactive theater into their schools' drug and alcohol awareness programs.

The Cooperative Extension Service (1990) has developed a video which describes the ROTA training. The video stresses key factors in the effective implementation an interactive theater program. Clearly defined characterization is the first of these factors. It is vital both as the skit is performed and as the audience asks questions following the performance, that characters remain consistent and clear. Time

needs to be spent with the performers analyzing their character, exploring their character's feelings and reactions and in considering questions the audience will likely ask of the character.

As each skit ends, audience questions are sought by a moderator who is moving through the audience with a microphone. It is up to the moderator to clarify audience comments, remain neutral, draw out reactions, and present a buffer, if necessary, between the audience and the characters. Suggestions are given in the video (Cooperative Extension Service, 1990) as to questions that might be posed by a moderator if the audience is not immediately involved. These questions fall into three categories, including "what", "so what" and "now what". "What" questions would include, for example, "What did you see going on between the characters?" "So what" questions would include, "How do the characters feel about each other and what is important that you learned from this situation?" Finally, "now what" questions would include, "How

does this apply to you and what can the characters do to change the situation?"

Positive feedback has been received from both the audiences and participants in ROTA activities. Cast member have said that they feel positive about their ability to help others look at solutions to difficult problems, they appreciate the new skills they have acquired and have enjoyed getting to know new people. Audience comments have reflected the fact that they see ROTA as a positive means of dealing with a serious subject, they enjoyed the interaction with cast members, and that they were able to see a different person's point of view through the skits. The most definitive evidence as to the value of ROTA comes, however, from the knowledge that ROTA received The Recognition of Excellence Award for the use of Youth Volunteers from the American Medical Association Adolescent Health Congress in 1990 (University of Maine, 1990).

In addition to the work that is being done through the Extension Service, it is estimated that between ten and twelve schools throughout

Maine currently have performing interactive theater groups (G. Ring, personal communication, September 20, 1991). Four advisors to these groups were interviewed by the author as a means of soliciting information about the use of interactive theater within Maine.

Marty Stevens, who currently works at Crossroads, an alternative high school in Skowhegan, is reportedly the initiator of interactive theater within Maine (M. Stevens, personal communication, September 26, 1991). She estimates the Teens in Theater (TNT) group with which she works had its beginnings around 1983. The idea for the theater group came from a family planning employee who had seen such a group perform at a national conference. Recognizing the power that theater has as a teaching tool, Stevens was ready to attempt interactive theater with students at Skowhegan High School.

Interactive theater, in Stevens' (personal communication, September 26, 1991) view, allows the audience to gain valuable health information in a non-threatening, non-blaming manner. She

stressed that the performance is not intended to be entertainment, but is rather a workshop in which the audience works. The questioning of the characters allows participants to gain information without having to admit that they lack knowledge on a particular subject. Key to the success of the audience participation of a program is the facilitator, who must be a special person, being both an actor and a counselor. The facilitator needs to be aware of those audience members especially impacted by the performance, so that support can be made available to them following the performance by school personnel (M. Stevens, personal communication, September 26, 1991).

Cast members are self-selected, with approximately twenty students being involved in the program at a time. Typically, Stevens takes six students for each engagement, preventing any one student from missing extensive amount of school.

In addition to her twice-weekly rehearsals and regular performances with Teens In Theater, Stevens also provides consultation and training

programs to others interested in starting interactive theater programs. Recognizing the limited literature on the subject of interactive theater, Stevens is in the process of writing a book on the topic (M. Stevens, personal communication, September 26, 1991).

Janet Smith, school counselor, advises an interactive theater group which originates from Camden-Rockport High School (personal communication, August 27, 1991). The group she advises moves through the three performance phases described previously: presentation of a skit, audience questions and comments to the characters, with closure being the actors introducing themselves to the audience.

Smith (personal communication, August 27, 1991) sees there being several critical elements which make the group's performances successful. Students need to be given a thorough educational foundation on which to develop a skit. The performers also need to spend time with their character so that they can successfully portray the feelings of this individual. Smith suggests

that a skit is flat, with little audience impact, if the feelings are not present.

Several cautions also were raised by Smith (personal communication, August 27, 1991). First, it is imperative that support and resources be available to students following the performance, as the impact on some individuals may be very powerful. Second, she feels that an adult with a counseling background should act as moderator. This person must be highly sensitive to the audience, and at times, specific individuals within that audience. As a final caution, she spoke of the need to be attuned to the audience when determining the skits to be used. While not specific to the performances, a final difficult aspect of interactive theater is the amount of time required to do the job effectively.

A very positive aspect of interactive theater for Smith (personal communication, August 27, 1991) has been the support generated among the group for one another. Several members of past casts have been recovering addicts and individuals who have been sexually abused. She notes that

often students returning from a treatment program have difficulty making new friends and gaining the support they require. The interactive theater group has provided this level of support for its members.

John Grant, school counselor at Lincoln Academy in Newcastle, is advisor for an interactive theater group called the L.A. Players, which began in 1986 (personal communication, September 6, 1991). The twelve-member cast with which he works performs skits exclusively around the theme of chemical dependency. A school must have a comprehensive drug and alcohol program in place in order for the L.A. Players to agree to perform.

Grant (personal communication, September 6, 1991) cautions that support services must be available for students following performances, due to the level of impact often attained. Additionally, he feels it important that he be the moderator to assist his students in difficult situations, and to support audience members who have become personally immersed in the material.

Finally, where 60% of the cast is from affected families, he feels it important to not allow students to play the parts they play in their own families.

While providing individual support is not a goal of the L.A. Players, it is a side effect which is evident. Graduating seniors speak of how beneficial being a part of this interactive theater group has been for them (J. Grant, personal communication, September 6, 1991).

Geno Ring, a substance abuse counselor at Morse High School in Bath, advises an interactive theater group called Growing Awareness Theater Experience (GATE) (personal communication, September 20, 1991). In his fourth year of working with the group, Ring describes interactive theater as being a very effective means of helping audience members develop a personal stance on difficult issues. The concept of kids teaching kids is one in which he believes strongly. Interactive theater can help a parent understand what life as an adolescent is like today, and is so powerful that it may bring audience members to

tears as they identify themselves in a skit being played out on stage.

Believing that any student who wants to participate should be so allowed, Ring has developed a second project this year for students who are not part of the eleven-member GATE cast. These students will be working with Ring on a program for sixth graders, to be done later in the school year (G. Ring, personal communication, September 20, 1991).

Ring describes participation in GATE as being a wonderful experience for both the cast members and himself. It allows him a unique opportunity to get to know students over an extended period of time. For the members of GATE, a real support group is formed, with rehearsal sessions sometimes being eliminated so that personal issues can be discussed (G. Ring, personal communication, September 20, 1991).

Requests for GATE performances have increased to the point that the group is generally booked a year in advance and has to turn down many requests. Ring is enthusiastic in the knowledge

that the number of interactive theater groups in Maine has increased annually, making it possible for him to refer people to other groups if his group is unable to do a performance. This increase in performance groups has also made possible an annual one-day workshop for faculty and student participants. Ring (personal communication, September 20, 1991) foresees at least ten schools taking part in this exchange of ideas and experiences this year.

Summary and Conclusion

In spite of the recognizably limited research base, interactive theater, with some cautions considered, holds much as an educational tool to be used by a school counselor. Cautions requiring consideration include the following: 1) thorough education of cast members around skit topics is critical, so that they can present accurate information in both the skit and in their answering of audience questions (Cooperative Extension Service, 1990); 2) time commitment is extensive to both the members of an interactive

theater cast and their advisor (J. Smith, personal communication, August 27, 1991); 3) the group's advisor must have the skills to effectively facilitate a meaningful dialogue during the audience participation aspect of the program, with sensitivity to the audience as a whole, as well as specific individuals (M. Stevens, personal communication, September 26, 1991); and 4) the availability of support for impacted audience members is critical when the cast and facilitator leave a show setting (J. Grant, personal communication, August 27, 1991).

Interactive theater has been shown to be both beneficial to the audience and cast members in the following ways: 1) lines of communication around difficult social issues are opened in a non-threatening manner (G. Ring, personal communication, September 20, 1991); 2) valuable educational information is provided and the possibility of increased use of medical services has been evidenced (Burdyshaw & Fowler, 1986); 3) cast members are provided a support group for dealing with personnel issues (J. Smith, personal

communication, August 27, 1991) and 4) cast members have been shown to gain in self esteem (Burdyshaw & Fowler, 1986) due to their participation in interactive theater groups.

Perhaps the real power, however, of interactive theater lies in the fact that "the whole approach is one of mutual trust - of working with the adolescents, rather than for them, and letting them discover ways and means to approach their problems, rather than offering ready-made solutions" (Borici, Welch, & Vargas, 1981, p. 154).

While the aforementioned cautions must be taken into consideration, interactive theater offers a viable means of providing education around difficult social issues for adolescents. Having a knowledge of interactive theater can be important for school counselors who struggle to effectively meet the challenge of educating students so that they are adequately prepared to meet the demands they face in our society.

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